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Life and Times of an Airborne Infantry Battalion Light Aid Detachment in 1960

By

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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
AN INFANTRY BATTALION LAD

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If you were to look through all the field unit establishments, old and new, you would not find such a unit as an airborne infantry battalion Light Aid Detachment. But, nevertheless, there has been one - quite recently.

Here is the story of this unique unit, its conception and birth, its trials and exercises, and finally, its timely and well-ordered decease at the ripe old age of six weeks.

Collective winter training in Western Command in 1959-60 involved an airborne battalion group, comprising an infantry battalion, an airborne signals troop, a medical section supported by a platoon of Royal Canadian Army Service Corps in a cold-weather airlanded exercise under isolation conditions. It became evident in the planning stages that a smaller preliminary exercise was necessary to develop administrative operating procedures for this type of operation. The battalion concerned, the Second Patricians, Edmonton, (2 PPCLI) was, therefore, committed to a six-week period covering both the preliminary and main exercise. The large concentration of vehicles and equipment involved would undergo heavy cold-weather usage, and required Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers support. The 2nd Battalion PPCLI ad hoc LAD was formed by the Command EME, Western Command, to support the battalion group, for the duration of the exercise period. The LAD's mission included supporting and umpire and enemy organizations.

The initial organization of the LAD was based on four vehicle teams of one NCO and one craftsman each, all vehicle mechanics. These teams were available to work together in the LAD location as mobile repair crews or as recovery crews. In practice, this principle was carried a little further in that, when such duties as cooking chores came up in the LAD, these men took their turns as teams. Distribution into tent groups was again by teams. Emphasis was heavily laid on "team" employment as the basic factor in LAD flexibility.

Around this core of vehicle mechanics was added a storeman for spare parts control, an armourer sergeant, a radio artificer staff sergeant and a craftsman welder to round out the working strength of the LAD so that all required trades were represented. The men themselves were drawn in from a number of units in the Alberta Area.

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The LAD command function was fulfilled with a Captain, RCEME, as Officer Commanding and a Sergeant Major vehicle artificer as second in command.

The vehicle strength of the LAD was at first based on the use of a jeep by each team. After the preliminary exercise, 3/4-ton cargo trucks with winches were used as recovery and mobile repair team vehicles, and two of these were provided. One was loaned by the parent unit, the other, which carried a winch and a collapsible derrick, was provided by 1 Field Workshop RCEME, Calgary. A jeep mounting a 200 amp arc welder, towing a gas welding trailer, was provided (with the craftsman welder) by the Lord Strathcona's LAD. One further jeep was provided by 2 PPCLI for use by the Officer Commanding the LAD. Each vehicle towed a trailer of corresponding size, carrying LAD stores, equipment and spare parts.

The unit equipment of the LAD was provided to fill the cold weather needs for shelter, heat, light and power, and the tactical requirement for black-out and concealment. To this end, a 3-ton lorry marquee became the workshop shelter, heated by a Herman Nelson heater, and lighted and powered by a 3.5 KVA Onan 110V AC generator.

It was found that two 3/4-ton vehicles (the largest employed in the airborne exercise) could be accommodated entirely inside the workshop shelter at one time. This permitted two vehicle crews to work simultaneously at the LAD location, leaving one crew available for recovery or work away as a mobile repair team. One crew remained in reserve, resting or employed on interior economy for the LAD.

A picture shows the spare parts trailer, fitted "tail gate in" to that place in the marquee which normally accommodates the lorry for which this tent was designed. The arrangement provided heat, light and easy access to the spare parts stock.

Living accommodation for the personnel of the LAD was two ten-man tents complete on sleds. In this equipment as drawn, stoves, lamps, axes and camp requirements were available. The sleds were especially useful for moving rations, POL, and other heavy loads around the battalion administrative area.

A photograph shows how the marquee and the two ten-man tents were arranged so that it was possible to heat all three from the Herman Nelson heater. Electric lights, however, were only strung in the marquee, although there is no reason why the lights could not have been carried into all tents. In actual operations, when a heavy small arms workload might require the armourer to set up shop in one of the ten-man tents during the day, lights would be highly desirable.

In order to mobilize the ad hoc LAD with a minimum of paper work, the battalion scale of garage and armourer's tools, together with the tool kits of the tradesmen of the LAD, formed the basis of tooling. It then required the addition of not more than 20 items of vehicle and telecommunications repair and test equipment to permit the LAD to operate up to its full role (and, as it turned out, beyond!). Such items as an output meter for the radio artificer,

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a generator regulator AVR test meter for vehicle work, and a chore horse for battery charging were included.

Spare parts provisioning by RCOC was begun approximately five weeks before the trial exercise, using temporary scales prepared by Command EME, Western Command. Following the trial exercise, some minor amendments were effected to correct holdings. At the time that the main exercise began, these scales were about 90% filled, and the LAD went into action with something like 300 line items of spare parts in stock. Usage was recorded in fifty line items, and a total of 120 parts moved during the five days of Exercise Snow Chinthe.

While it might appear that the LAD carried six times its requirements in parts, it must be borne in mind that many of the vehicles used had been only just removed from storage. Anticipating the incidence of repair is highly uncertain in this circumstance. Further, the exercise involved six different types of vehicles and six different types of communications equipment, as well as a range of small generators and chargers.

Since there was no operational requirement for small arms repairs, only the normal unit scale of small arms parts was carried. This was on distribution to the armourer from the battalion quartermaster, and was not part of LAD spare parts.

Supplies and POL for the LAD were provided through the parent unit. Although the LAD consumption of such commodities as petrol was distinctly higher than normal infantry battalion experience, preplanning by the parent unit was good, and all the LAD's critical requirements were met.

When the preliminary exercise ("Shakedown") began 25 January 1960 at Wainwright, there were very few shortages of a critical nature in any part of the LAD structure, and the personnel of the LAD were enabled to clearly observe on the practicality of their own organization and equipment during this trial run.

"Shakedown" combined a parachute landing with a partially simulated airborne move from Edmonton (Namao Airfield) to Wainright, followed by five days of tactical operations supported by a simulated air supply system.

During these five days, the LAD had a good opportunity to"get its feet wet" providing service for the battalion group, and in thoroughly testing the adequacy of its own organization.

During "Shakedown," the LAD accomplished about 100 repairs and recoveries, and at the end of the exercise there was one vehicle only off the road-and this for repair beyond LAD scope. In addition, a pattern of operation had been developed by the LAD which fitted into the organization of the battalion with only slight minor changes to their standard procedures.

Some of the highlights of this trial exercise included such events as the arc welding job that was done with the welder literally upside down in the

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driver's seat of a RAT (Carriers, Cargo, Light, Articulated) welding a bracket under the dash panel; the evening meal when, by some miracle of cooking, the day's cooks were able to print a menu (with choices!) out of IFRs (Individual Field Rations); the adaption of a jeep shock absorber to fit a RAT; and even the RC Padre found the heated LAD shelter a useful place for Sunday Mass!

A short stand down followed "Shakedown", then the business of replenishment, the minor organizational changes and implementation of some equipment changes took place.

At this point the need for AC power became clear. This was obtained through 1 Field Workshop, RCEME. As a consequence, one or two light portable power tools were added to the LAD list of equipments. But changes were minor, and through the excellent cooperation of all supporting units, were accomplished smoothly and easily. The major "between exercise" effort, from the 4th to 20th of February, was devoted to getting unit equipment back into fighting shape.

At the conclusion of the refurbishing programme, the battalion group was roadworthy. All changes in LAD organization and equipment were completed, and spare parts used on "Shakedown" had been 90% replenished. For the start of the main exercise, the LAD had no serious deficiencies in personnel or equipment.

On receipt of a Warning Order, 19 February 1960, that an enemy force was operating in the vicinity of Cold Lake airport, Alberta, the battalion group's main base message centre opened, and Exercise Snow Chinthe began. An advance base was immediately established at RCAF Station, Namao, and during the 20 and 21 February the entire friendly force was marshalled and prepared for the air journey.

At first light, 22 February, "A" Company, 2 PPCLI, parachuted into Cold Lake area, and as soon as word was received that Cold Lake airport was clear of enemy, the airlift of the rest of the battalion group began. Flying continuous missions, 435 Transport Squadron RCAF listed the entire battalion group from Namao to Cold Lake in less than 24 hours.

It was about 0100, 23 February, when the first vehicles of the LAD were driven off the C-119 (Flying Box Car) into cold crisp air, and stopped! The deplaning point had become a temporary concentration area for the administrative group of the battalion. Movement into the area selected on the map was held up by enemy action at a key bridge, and the unit spent the rest of the night right where the vehicles stopped. Soon after dawn, which brought a heavy frost haze, the way had been cleared to proceed and the administrative group began to move out. Continuing flights during the night had bought two further LAD vehicles in, so three out of four vehicles of the LAD, following a little behind the rest of the administrative group, moved three or four miles west of Cold Lake airport, and began setting up shop at 1130 hrs., 23 February.

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Two hours later enough was done that the LAD was open for business with a hot meal under its belt. The last vehicle had arrived in the last aircraft load of the battalion lift, and appeared at the new LAD location just in time for lunch. With the battle now fully joined, work began in earnest. A waiting backlog of six vehicles was hauled in from the airfield. Two RATS required new engines, and with parts shipped in by air re-supply, the LAD was able to complete one engine installation by 1800 hrs, 24 February. The second engine could not be completed due to lack of the correct parts, but the LAD had established its capability to do this work when needed.

Two further repairs beyond normal LAD scope were completed during the exercise, with the changing of transmissions into two 3/4-ton vehicles. The second of these was done exactly in two hours!

Remaining repairs carried out by the LAD during the five days were all within the permissive repair schedules, and the scaling of parts had been such that, apart from one or two miscellaneous equipments, of a special nature there were parts available for every job in first-line scope.

In addition to the LAD, there was a two-man recovery crew, with a Truck, Recovery, M62, based at Cold Lake, for assistance to enemy and neutral forces, and for any "real" emergency use where a threat to human safety might exist. This crew carried out a total of 18 recoveries and repairs on vehicles belonging to the enemy and neutral control staffs.

The LAD itself carried out 122 jobs during its five days of operation, as follows:

Recoveries, 21
Vehicle Repairs, 44
Telecommunications Repairs, 19
Welding Repairs, 16
Miscellaneous, (stoves, lamps, arctic gear), 22

The RATS, along with the other oversnow vehicles involved, were back-loaded by road at the conclusion of the exercise, and the battalion group, the enemy and umpire organizations returned from Cold Lake to Edmonton by road.

On return ad hoc LAD turned back its stores to the parent unit, and cleared its spare parts back to 17 Regional Ordnance Depot. Borrowed personnel and equipment were homeward bound by 2 March with a wider experience than before, and another set of memories to relive at "old soldier" time.

The experience of the LAD established that there is a real and needed place for an LAD function with such a battalion group, particularly under circumstances of isolation, where great need for improvisation always exists.

Despite the varied sources of it's personnel, the LAD became a cohesive unit during its short life, and possessed of an identity and an esprit de corps all its own. All ranks concerned thoroughly enjoyed a most interesting experience, which, because of the healthy and active cooperation from all ranks of the battalion and other supporting units, was made smooth and straightforward.